

The Ottawa Citizen

Monday, November 27, 2006

Page: A13

Section: News

Page Name: Arguments

Byline: Robert Muggah

Source: Citizen Special

How Darfur can get worse: Camps in Darfur and Chad are ripe for the recruitment of angry young men into armed groups, further threatening the safety of refugees

The recent killing of hundreds of Chadians by so-called "Arab militia" and "militarized refugees" from Sudan's war-torn Darfur region signals a dangerous escalation of the region's ongoing conflict.

It also underlines the importance of adopting a new strategy, one that will effectively tackle the root causes of militarization rather than focusing exclusively on its symptoms.

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are becoming increasingly militarized in both Chad and Darfur. Aid workers there report that the symptoms of refugee militarization -- including cross-border attacks from camps, forced recruitment of refugees and IDPs into armed groups, and widespread victimization at gun-point -- are steadily worsening. Such militarization not only violates core principles of international humanitarian and refugee law, it also threatens to ignite renewed conflict in the region less than a year after the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement.

Militarization threatens the safety of residents in hundreds of dilapidated camps that litter the border between Chad and Sudan. As it is, a significant proportion of the 200,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad and 1.5 million IDPs in Darfur are huddled in "stick-and-plastic" internment sites. Maternal and infant mortality rates of the residents are off the charts. The Kalashnikov has altered the moral order of Darfur. Ethnic tensions, such as those between Darfur's Rizeigat, Zayadiya, Zaghawa, Fur, Masalit and other tribal groups, are threatening to explode. These camps are ripe for the recruitment of angry young men into armed groups.

Besides spreading insecurity, militarization also jeopardizes refugee and IDP access to food and water. The intimidation of aid workers by Rizeigat and Zayadia Arab militias (the "Janjaweed") has effectively shut down access to more than 300,000 IDPs. It is clear that the situation will deteriorate further.

This is not the first time the international community has faced this challenge. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) came face to face with militarization just after the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo, refugee camps that were home to Rwandans were infiltrated by Interahamwe and Hutu genocidaires.

UNHCR and its partners learned a series of traumatic lessons from the resulting bloodbath. The agency elaborated a "ladder of options" to confront the issue: The lower rungs include "soft" options while the upper ones call for "harder," more muscular peace enforcement.

Examples of UNHCR's softer interventions range from the relocation of refugees far from international borders to "screening" mass influxes for potential soldiers and militia. Sometimes they send international and local police into the camps to enforce disarmament. To them, an armed refugee is not a refugee at all.

Canada has recently supported successful efforts to demilitarize refugee and IDP camps in such countries as Tanzania and Guinea. Now it must do more in Sudan. But in so doing, it must address the largely political root causes of militarization.

Refugee militarization does not take place in a vacuum. Human-rights workers and officials of the African Union (AU) contend that government-backed Janjaweed and Darfurian rebel groups are in fact deliberately exporting genocide from Sudan into Chad. Such activities are not without precedent. In the 1980s, Libya's leader Moammar Gadhafi backed Chadian refugees in Darfur to fight the Chadian government. Since then, the governments of Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Chad unequivocally continue to support the arming of refugees, including child soldiers.

In a comprehensive study of the issue, the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey and UNHCR discovered that refugees and IDPs are regularly manipulated and recruited into Africa's long-standing proxy wars. The knee-jerk response of certain governments has been to close down the very camps that provided at least some level of protection. But blaming refugees or IDPs for conflicts and restricting their rights to asylum fails to address the root causes. What is more, soft options such as those endorsed by UNHCR can only achieve so much.

Increased political leverage on Sudan applied by all UN Security Council members and the AU, and by Canada, is the most likely option for enhancing protection and saving lives. Ensuring that aid agencies can continue their work, effectively and in safety, decreases the likelihood of militarization. But where countries are unable or unwilling to protect their citizens, such as by disarming those who would harm them, the international community has a political and moral obligation to intervene.

With the failure to convince the Sudanese government to accept a hybrid UN-AU force, the Darfur Peace Agreement in tatters and the African peacekeeping mission (AMIS) struggling to keep the peace, a new political formula is urgently required. The AU and its partners have been unable to convince the Sudanese government to disarm the Janjaweed, much less militarized refugees and IDPs. Despite recent announcements of more talks in Libya, Sudan is closing Darfur to the outside world.

The adoption of UN resolution 1706, which "invites" Sudan to accept 20,000 UN peacekeepers to support AMIS, is a step in the right direction. Despite Sudan's fierce

resistance to granting access to UN blue helmets, it is time for all members of the UN Security Council and the AU, and Canada as well, to show unity and press their case. Without more robust support from the international community, the violence plaguing Darfur and Chad will spread further still.

Robert Muggah is project co-ordinator of the Small Arms Survey and an SSRC Fellow at Oxford University. His most recent book is *No Refuge: The Crisis of Refugee Militarization in Africa*.